

Comics Communities in Letters Pages: Make *Misty* for Me

SLIDE: MISTY

For those not in the know, *Misty* is a British girls comic that was published by IPC between 1978-1980 and ran for 101 issues before merging with *Tammy*. It was devised by 2000AD creator Pat Mills and is a 32-page anthology comic that told horror and mystery stories.

SLIDE: content

Each issue contained an average of three one-shot stories (generally four pages long) and three or four serials that stretched over 10 or so issues in four-page instalments. It also contained an inside cover welcome from *Misty* herself, our fictional editor, a smattering of prose stories and 'true ghost stories' sent in by readers, a 'Write to *Misty*' letters page, a horoscope section called 'Star Days', a regular comedy cartoon strip called Miss T about a hapless witch, and a handful of half-page adverts. It described itself as a 'mystery story paper for girls' but with the tagline 'stories not to be read at night' and a strong strand of horror and punishment it is most remembered for scaring the holy hell out of its young readers – including me.

It's fondly remembered today and has a cult following on the internet that have clamoured for its return for years. And we've had some success – Rebellion Publishers are in fact re-releasing a series of collected reprints, starting this September. I've been researching *Misty* for the past few years by annotating the complete run of 101 issues in archive at the BL, aiming to produce a critical book (which should be published by Palgrave early next year) and an online spreadsheet of all the stories with writers and artists credits that I can locate. But from reading it and speaking to those who remember it, I became really interested in the letters page.

SLIDE: letters

Not many critics have looked at comics letters pages in any depth, and there's a healthy aura of suspicion about many of them, especially historically, where it often seems likely that the letters are simply made up by the publishers. However, Martin Barker points out that even if the letters are genuine, they have been carefully selected and edited, and so should be treated as a constructed narrative. In fact we could say that comics letters pages can usefully be considered as part of the self-projected image of the comic. Daniel Stein looks at American comics and calls their letters pages 'serial paratexts' that foster collaboration between creator and readers. Mel Gibson (2015: 170) also argues that the letters pages create a sense of connection and allow readers to feel part of 'a mature and expansive international community'. I started to wonder what image the 'Write to *Misty*' page was constructing and whether this was consistent with (1) the dominant discourses of the horror genre, (2) the reputation and readership of British girls' comics, and (3) the use and abuse of comics letters pages more generally.

First, a disclaimer. My background in academia is in close reading and literary criticism so I'm slightly uncomfortable with quantitative research. I decided the

best path for me would be, rather than devising and then hunting for particular set of criteria, instead to make cumulative notes of the content of the letters pages and use these to see if any patterns emerged. So I started, as is generally best, at the beginning, and worked my way through the complete corpus of 90 or so letters pages (as they begin with issue 8). When I'd finished, I tested my conclusions against pages selected from random issues.

The 'Write to Misty' letters page appears in nearly every issue from #8 (25 March 1978) onwards [not in #20], offering £5 for the Star Letter and £2 for every one printed. It covers either a double or single page and contains a picture of Misty and an average of 6 letters. At its peak Misty claims she receives 500 letters per week (#90). Reading the printed selection reveals an active, empowered and diverse audience.

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The very first letters page (#8) contains the seeds of nearly all the different themes that would appear in the remaining 93 issues of the comic's run.

Star letter – telekinesis and praise for Moonchild

Misty Medicine – overactive thyroid but cheered by Misty

Is he a cissy? – Boy who read his sister's copy and thought it was great

Misty fever – discovered Misty when ill and loved it

Riddle – answer is Misty

Maggie and Marcella – reader Maggie shares the protagonist's name in 'Paint it Black' and concludes it will be interesting to see what happens to her each week

Fright of the Dog – pet dog frightened by gargoyles

Tops – praise for the scary stories in Misty

True or Not – do you make up your own stories? And think you're pretty

Best ever – Praise for Misty and Cult of the Cat

Spooktacular – poem in praise of the comic

These letters are, of course, not just selected by the editors of *Misty* (or even potentially written by them) but also have the effect of encouraging more of the same type.

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As such they are used to construct a particular self-image for the comic that continues throughout its entire run, and which is built around the following six ideas (and please excuse my tendency towards alliteration): creativity; curiosity; connection; community and conversation; comment and criticism; and compass.

The figures are taken from a sample of every tenth issue (and although expressed as percentages don't add up to 100 because many letters fall into more than one category) – but should give you a sense of how often these themes appeared.

If we refer back to the original first letters page we can find that these categories fit their content in the following ways.

Creativity comes out through the riddle and the poem

Curiosity in 'True or Not', which asks who makes up the stories
Connection via shared names, and the reader's dog's behaviour, and the role the comic has played in cheering up the two readers who are ill
There's nothing that supports community but as this is the first letters page and a dialogue has yet to begin this is not surprising
Comment and criticism are present in the discussion of telekinesis and the praise for particular stories
And compass of both age and location through the male reader and the reader in Dublin.

These categories were derived from surveying the whole run and they became the basis for my research and I began to look more closely at the dialogue taking place within each.

SLIDE: Creativity

Misty's readers are an imaginative lot and creative work features in almost every issue. Poems are the most common, of various types (especially acrostic) and almost all of them are either about *Misty* herself or addressed directly to her. Readers engage with the comic's tone and language and bring in suitable mythic references, like this example on the left which includes fog, nymphs, the ocean and so forth.

Other subjects do of course feature, such as 'What is an image?' (Deborah Matthews, #47), spiders (Arlene Russo, #45), Miss T (Sarah Moolla, #70). Nightmares (Amanda Neai*, #76), and a reprimand for readers who do not reserve their copies (Joanne Darkins, #94). Poems also create dialogue with each other, for example this 'Black is the colour....' piece which was followed a few months later by a different reader's poem 'Red is the colour...' However they always revolve around the themes and aesthetic of *Misty*. As well as rhyming verse there are prose poems and epistles, also written in the mythic style of *Misty's* own introductions to each issue, like this example from Christine Fortune.

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There are also more innovative formats that try to capture what *Misty* means to its readers. In #27 a reader describes *Misty* as a cake recipe 'Add 2 ounces of terror to 1 ounce of horror...' (Misty Fan, #27)

And as well as written work, *Misty* inspires creativity of different types such as sisters Yvonne and Adele who taped the stories and added sound effects; a mother who writes in about a play her children wrote, and other less dramatic, but still creative responses. In #29 Kaye Shirley sends in her 'Misty comic review' which sums up what has happened so far in all the serialised stories, and in #26 J.F.D. Wood works out the cost of each word based on the 8p cover price and concludes that one word of *Misty* costs just 1/800 of a penny and that readers should stop complaining about the cost. Later in the comic's run jokes also begin to appear, printed under headings such as 'Ghostly gags' and 'Ghastly gags' (#66).

There is also use of critical and intertextual thinking to navigate the comic. Claudette Young writes in to point out the visual similarities between Mr Walenski's secret (#*) and Anne Frank, (#74); Susan Collinge links the story 'Welcome Home' (*) to Greek myth (#76); and Joanne Harrison provides information about children who have been brought up by wolves, relating to the story 'Wolf Girl'. Misty responds to these sorts of observations and so encourages this sort of creative critical and intertextual thinking

SLIDE: Curiosity

As the creative work shows, Misty herself is the focus for many readers, whose interest in her ranges from the curious to the obsessive. Mel Gibson's study of comics readers' memories draws on several interviews with lesbian participants to demonstrate their resistive readings of heterosexual comics stories, and of course includes a mention of *Misty* for example from Elsa who says 'I fancied Misty like mad' (2015: 133). Numerous letters compliment Misty on her beauty, and speak about their connection with her, of which these are just a few examples.

Many letters also contain direct questions about Misty's background and origins and there is an overwhelming desire throughout to know who she is and for more information. Misty generally answers, but seldom gives anything away, responding for example 'very close to the truth' to readers who try and guess her origins. For example in #26 Jane Rooney writes to ask how old Misty is, with a request to 'please answer the question'. Misty replies '*Child of the mists, born on the very first midnight hour, I am as old as time itself, Jane – Misty.*' Similar questions continue throughout the entire run, such as the colour of her eyes, her star sign, whether there is TV or radio in the Cavern of Dreams, or the name of her cat (after noting she is holding one in a picture).

Other questions are more confrontational in pointing out inconsistencies or improbabilities, and test the boundaries of fiction and reality. For example Malgosia Cywinska (#44) asks '...where are The Pool of Life, The Cavern of Dreams and all those other places you talk about... Please tell me so I can see you in real life and help you unpack all those letters.' And Misty responds with the parable of '*the man who wandered the world for a lifetime looking for Happiness and came home only to find it was in his own back garden all the time?*' saying that her misty world is '*a bit like that*'.

Effectively, readers want to know Misty's story while being aware that this can never be possible (literalising the Derridean *aporia* of texts) – and so the fragments of information offered become more like moves in an ongoing game between writer and reader. Molly Adesigbin (#40) points out that telling her story would make Misty 'not mysterious or mystic any more' and A. Twiseldon (#22) summarises this perfectly in the final quote here, saying 'I hope you *don't* tell us your story because I like to think of you as something strange with no story to tell.'

In this way *Misty's* readers help to construct the character's identity, shaping it by the questions they ask, and by putting forward their own ideas.

SLIDE: Connection

The readers are also keen to point out connections between their lives and the stories and to share ways in which these have helped them navigate problems and fears. It's often based on names or scenarios. Readers such as Tula * (#35) and Nicola ** (#66) identify with their counterparts in 'The Black Widow' and 'Cult of the Cat', and Deirdre Marris (#27) identifies with Cult of the Cat in more embarrassing terms as she has an occasional long hair growing out of her cheek and wonders 'whether I have been chosen [...] to be a servant of Bast...'

A trend for sharing unusual names takes over around #67 where Effie * identifies with the use of her name and trickles on into later issues, also extending to surnames (Notwithit, #75 and Kitcat, #76).

Readers also find echoes of the stories in their daily lives. After reading 'The Haunting of Hazel Brown' in which a glove chases the protagonist, Lesley Mouncer (#53) writes in 'I kept looking over my shoulder to make sure my glove wasn't following me and then one day . . . it WAS! I ran downstairs to try and get rid of it but it followed me. [...] I've never been so scared in my life.' – she explains that after tidying her sewing kit both glove and foot got caught up in some loose black cotton. More movingly, Gwen Howard (#57) shares her experience about the death of her pet Goldie and Michelle Findlay also (#55) writes that she understood 'Whistle and I'll Come' only after her rabbit died

Readers also share phobias and fears (such as Janet Palmer's claustrophobia, #11) and the cathartic value of *Misty's* stories and her soothing character is clear from numerous letters, such as Stephanie Moss's, shown here. *Misty* is a reassuring presence, which perhaps explains readers sharing problems that worry them, for example Fiona Ware's (#54) concerns about the 'queer feeling' of déjà vu she experiences.

It seems that *Misty* has a big impact on its readers' lives and attitudes and that they are as keen to find themselves in its pages as they are to learn more about *Misty*. As Tabitha Troughton concludes her poem (#55):

'...Misty is a mystery.
Who is Misty? Who?
Could the lovely Misty be
In some strange reality – you?'

SLIDE: Community and conversation

As well as finding themselves in *Misty* there is a strong sense of community and conversation on the *Misty* letters page and when subjects are raised these are often picked up by other readers, such as a debate about déjà vu which runs across more than ten issues. As well telling *Misty* about the comics societies and *Misty* fan clubs they have set up (Joanne Burns, #59; #96), girls and boys also talk to each other through the letters page, inviting them to join these groups (Kathleen Pittaway, #95; Edmund Marmse, #96), sharing or selling previous issues, or responding to letters and opinions. Sometimes letters are not even

addressed to *Misty* but instead to other readers. There are direct challenges and debate about previous opinions, for example 'I noticed Clare Harris's letter about bringing back Miss Nocturne and I fully agree with her...' ('Countess' Kathleen Pittaway, #95) or 'Your reader was wrong when she said there were only two other ways of killing vampires other than a stake through the heart.' (Nichola Layzell, #95).

Across periods of many months, readers enter into dialogue with each other: lending or selling annuals and back issues, setting up independent comics clubs and reading groups and inviting their peers to join, responding directly to other readers' letters, and debating the opinions and preferences expressed. The *Misty* community thrives on both conversation and challenge.

SLIDE: Comment and criticism

Misty encourages critical comment, as the voting coupon included on each letters page demonstrates and participation is encouraged, for example Miss T is drawn saying 'Come on, now, *Misty* and me want you to fill in this coupon!' (#16) and *Misty* rewards those who have sent theirs in with a namecheck (#48). Obviously there is lots of praise, but *Misty* does not seem shy about printing negative comments. Various aspects come under fire, such as Wendy the Witch who is 'too babyish' for Jennifer Watts (#65), the comic's layout (the Star Days horoscopes and splash pages are deemed a 'waste of space' and 'disgraceful' by Lorraine Forbes, #97), specific details or errors made in stories (#75) and some of the endings (#99). The tone of *Misty* is something readers are conscious of and anxious to protect from any perceived damage, such as Elisabeth Kendall's letter (#93) which praises the magazine but then complains about the pop culture content of the 'Magic Circle' game 'Not what we expect from you at all. I will have to rewrite the cards.'

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Like all good debate, though, there are a number of controversies when readers disagree and things sometimes get personal. The letter from 'Jennifer' (#34) is the most controversial:

I don't suppose you'll print this, you're probably too cowardly, but I want to tell you I think your comic is appalling, really awful and makes me want to be sick. Your comic should be banned. I expected the comic to be about witches and spooky but nice stories. But no. Take for instance your 15th July issue with the pet shop story. It upset me – the poor mouse – and I know many girls feel the same way so make the comic better and print this letter.
P.S. Get this printed!

Misty responds that she has printed this because it is 'the only' letter like it she has received since *Misty* started, pointing out that justice was done in this story to the children who killed the mouse, and asking what other readers think? And they tell her. 7 issues later (#41) *Misty* dedicates nearly the entire letters page to a 'small selection' of readers' responses, saying she has been overwhelmed with letters in a ratio of thirty to one against Jennifer's opinions. These letters range

from the pragmatic to the 'disgusted', and 'appalled', and attack Jennifer's 'childish' notions of ghost stories and lack of imagination. Really interestingly though, the subject comes up again in #50 where Misty is then critiqued by two readers for printing so many letters against Jennifer: 'even if her letter was a bit nasty weren't you also nasty to print so many letters criticising her' (Linda Mansfield) and pointing out that readers are invited to give their opinions (Ann Heron).

A similar process happens again around issue 94 when Tina Pym complains about the comic. And a spirited defence of the character Miss T takes place in late 1979 after a letter from Amanda Starling () says she is rubbish. This dominates the letters page for three issues (#89-#91) with poems and lively letters both for and against. In the final count Misty claims that 270 people support Miss T with just 26 against: 'a victory for the little witch of more than ten to one'.*

So as well as containing a lot of compliments, 'Write to Misty' does not shy away from printing negative comment and even personal abuse directed at Misty herself and her readers. She could even be accused of stirring up controversy by inviting argument, but does not exercise unilateral power; instead appealing to readers to respond to and defend her position. However, she does justify and explain herself when directly confronted – for example explaining that the number of letters against Jennifer that were printed was reflective of the total received.

SLIDE: Compass

Finally, the letters page demonstrates that the compass of *Misty's* readership covers diverse ages, genders and locations. Misty claims that, based on her post, she has readers aged 7-21 (#10), but readers complain throughout that their parents, teachers and brothers steal it, as we can see in this poem.

There is also 70 year old reader Mrs Beatrice Woodman (#37) and Karen Cunningham's 85-year old gran who has started putting in her own order (#52). At the other end of the scale there are letters from 10-year-old Nicola Jackson (praising Miss T) and 9-year-old Elizabeth Tring asking if Misty could 'put the most scary stories at the beginning and the less scary ones at the end so's I can get to sleep at night.' (#84).

Different class demographics are also present, such as second-year University student Patricia Tierney who thinks *Misty* is a good weekly for *anyone* to read' (#22), and Ross M.W. Wallace writes to say he and his University friends all read it and 'the youngest is 21' (#71). Male readers of *Misty* also come in all ages, and is just as dedicated as the girls: Catrina Binky exposes her Dad as 'a real Misty fan. [...] [who] cuts up the mag, and is making a great scrapbook of all the stories stuck together to make full-length picture strips.' (#72). Edmund Harmse (#96) writes from his home in South Africa that he has set up a *Misty* fan club, and the global reach of *Misty* is also obvious with letters from all of these locations. The compass of *Misty's* readership thus takes in a wide spread of ages, genders and locations and is summed up best, perhaps, in Misty's response to Chantal

Clarkson (#45) who asks 'Can you tell me why adults like Misty so much?' and is told '*Everybody loves a good story.*'

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This analysis of 'Write to Misty' shows that readers engage with the comic in many different ways that all demonstrate creative, critical and collegiate reader response. To return to my original questions, when considering *Misty's* genre and audience, this seems particularly apt. Much of the appeal of horror and gothic literature comes from its challenge to our bravery and imaginations; its innate conservatism and reassurance of our own normality; and (paradoxically) its challenge to social norms and notions of acceptability. The patterns found in *Misty* encompass all of these aspects. Creativity and curiosity stimulate our imagination and test our bravery; connection, community and conversation, and compass allow us to feel that we belong and explore our own normality; while comment and criticism sustain our subversive and challenging streak.

The categories also suit the comic's target readership. Horror and gothic have historically appealed to female readers: providing escapism from their restricted choices and limited lives. *Misty* gives its readers space to respond to its content creatively and critically, and to engage with each other on these terms, in a similar manner to that discussed in Dr Mel Gibson's study *Remembered Reading*. This focuses on the neglected memories of female adult readers and argues that 1970s girl readers used their comics to negotiate patriarchy through community and individuality: by reading widely and sharing their experiences. Her interviews also reveal a depth of emotional experience and detailed knowledge about these lost and devalued texts that is apparent on the page itself and also in *Misty's* fanbase today, as shown by the groups campaigning for its return.

As I mentioned earlier, critics also consider comics letters pages as sites of commentary, community and collaboration. Gibson draws attention to the ways British titles offered problem pages while American titles encouraged readers to comment 'directly on the stories' and *Misty* seems to fall into both camps. Daniel Stein claims that the letters pages are an equalising space as they transform readers into authors and editors into readers. My findings from analysing 'Write to Misty' support both these claims. The letters page is strongly egalitarian, offering a community and collaborative spirit, and *Misty* (like the editors Stein discusses) 'play[s] the role of the moderator always at the service of his/her audience' (168) and encourages creative and critical opinion. The selected and solicited nature of comics letters pages also construct a particular 'self-image' for the comic. I would therefore argue that the types of reader response shown in 'Write to Misty' are shaped around the priorities of the horror genre, the audience for British girls comics, and the use of comics letters pages more generally.